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They Had an Abortion After a Down Syndrome Test, Then Told Millions

After Jesse Ridgway, a popular YouTuber, and his wife, Ashley, revealed the news, death threats followed.



The Ridgways's decision was not unusual. Credit...Steve Zak Photography



By [Pooja Salhotra](#)

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For more than a decade, Jesse Ridgway has made a living posting YouTube videos, some personal, to millions of followers. It seemed natural, then, he said, to share that he and his wife, Ashley, had decided to terminate her pregnancy after a test revealed the presence of Trisomy 21, a form of Down syndrome.

“This choice was not made lightly,” Mr. Ridgway, 33, wrote in a lengthy [post on X](#) on Wednesday evening, two days after his wife underwent an abortion.

“We made a difficult decision that we believe in the long-run will be beneficial for our family,” he added.

People share many personal things on social media — infidelity, job loss, terminal illness. But almost never this. The post, viewed 22.1 million times, received a torrent of hateful comments from parents of children with Down syndrome, abortion opponents and even the House speaker, Mike Johnson, who called the couple’s decision “evil.” The couple said they had received death threats and been likened to Hitler.

“We are not able to hide from it,” Mr. Ridgway said in a phone interview on Friday. “It’s on every social platform, and it’s gotten so big that people from my high school are reaching out.”

The Ridgways’s decision was not unusual. Among pregnant women in the United States who receive a Down syndrome diagnosis, about [74 percent](#) choose to terminate the pregnancy, research shows. That figure is even higher in some other countries, such as [Iceland](#), where almost all such pregnancies are aborted.

The online reaction has thrust into the spotlight one of the most emotionally fraught and rarely discussed decisions that parents have to make. Some disability rights advocates have welcomed the public conversation about Down syndrome that the post has generated, but they also raised concerns that people could misunderstand what it means to live with the condition.

In his post, Mr. Ridgway wrote that 50 percent of babies with Down syndrome have heart defects, 75 percent have hearing challenges and more than 50 percent have vision problems. “Down syndrome isn’t a ‘blessing,’” he wrote.

Advocates for people with disabilities said that those statistics painted a dire and incomplete picture.

They give the impression “that having Down syndrome makes your life not worth living,” said Stephanie Smith Lee, the co-director of policy and advocacy for the National Down Syndrome Congress, an advocacy organization. “That is just absolutely wrong and it’s hurtful.”

Every year, about 6,000 babies are born in the United States with Down syndrome, according to the [National Institutes of Health](#). Some people with Down syndrome have other medical problems, such as congenital heart defects, hearing loss or sleep apnea.

Over the past 25 years, the average life span of people with Down syndrome has doubled, from 30 years to 60, but people with the condition still face significant health challenges.

The Ridgways first learned about the diagnosis through what was supposed to be a gender reveal celebration, which they recorded and posted on social media. Mr. Ridgway's brother was entrusted with the test results, which disclose not only the sex, but also the possibility of Down syndrome.

Looking at the results, the brother is visibly uneasy and quietly tells Mr. Ridgway about the unexpected news. The gender reveal proceeds anyway.

About a month later, the couple posted another video, this time sharing the results of an amniocentesis, a test that provides definitive results for genetic disorders. After they read the results, Ms. Ridgway sobs.

"I bought boy clothes," she said between tears in the video. "I had the nursery picked out. I was ready."

Carol Cronin, whose 30-year-old son has Down syndrome, said that while she would not judge any couple for choosing to terminate their pregnancy after a diagnosis, she felt that the medical community had "catastrophized" Down syndrome, making it difficult for new parents to accept that their child may have the genetic condition.

"My son has a very full and fantastic life," Ms. Cronin said. "He has made the lives of many many other people who have come in contact with him much better."

The fallout from the post has been painful, the Ridgways said, but if they had the chance, they would do it again.

"I don't regret how we went about everything," Ms. Ridgway, 31, said. "We are open and honest with our audience because we have a close and personal relationship with a lot of them."

Ms. Ridgway said she was trying to ignore the hateful posts and focus on the empathetic ones. She said she and her husband had received messages from mothers who are grateful for the couple's candor, from friends sharing for the first time that they, too, had an abortion, and from strangers, some of whom had family members with Down syndrome, saying they understood the decision.

The Ridgways emphasized that they never intended to offend or disregard people with Down syndrome or other disabilities.

"I just hope people can empathize with the fact that it's a hard situation to be in," Mr. Ridgway said. "We are just trying to do what is right for our family."

Georgia Gee contributed research.

[Pooja Salhotra](#) covers breaking news across the United States.